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Appalachian Folk Magic and Granny Witchcraft

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Many of today's modern witchcraft traditions are rooted in the folk magic customs of days gone by. In America's Appalachian mountain region, there's a long and storied tradition of magic that today is referred to as granny magic, or granny witchcraft. Passed down from one generation to the next, women of the hills used a combination of religious texts, [traditional herbal medicine](#), and down-home remedies to treat their neighbors for a variety of complaints.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Takeaways: Appalachian Granny Magic



- Although "granny magic" is a relatively new term, the traditional magical practices of Appalachia have a long history.
- Many practitioners in the mountains use a combination of faith healing and traditional folk magic.
- Granny magic is experiencing a resurgence in popularity as people with mountain backgrounds embrace their heritage.

What Is Appalachian Granny Witchcraft?

The history of Appalachia itself is the history of the granny witchcraft tradition; although the name is relatively new, the customs go back a long time. A combination of folk magic, faith healing, and superstitions, granny magic was often the only source of aid for people in remote, isolated regions.

As European settlers arrived in the colonies during the 18th century, they brought with them the traditional folk magic and healing modalities of their home countries. Primarily women, these healers used the concepts they'd learned in Scotland, England, and Ireland. Once they settled in, they met their Native American neighbors, who taught them about the plants, roots, and leaves indigenous to the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, and beyond. They also blended their practice with German immigrants, who arrived in Pennsylvania and began migrating south and west. Soon, they began incorporating the knowledge brought to the mountains by people of African descent, escaping slavery in the South.

Traditional granny magic included a lot of different practices. Dowsing, the practice of looking for water with a forked stick or a length of copper, was a valuable skill to have if you or your neighbors needed to dig a new well. Practitioners often tended to the needs of women; they worked as midwives and assisted in the birth of new babies—but could also be counted upon to provide herbal remedies if a young woman didn't want to become pregnant. In areas that rarely had access to professional medical care, the granny witch worked as a healer, crafting poultices and salves and teas with curative properties. Divination could be done in the remains of tea or coffee grounds in the bottom of a cup.

In 1908, John C. Campbell went to Appalachia to conduct a study of living conditions in the mountains. The result was a book called *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*. According to Campbell,

[O]ne may become a grandmother young in the mountains—if she has survived the labor and tribulation of her younger days, has gained a freedom and a place of irresponsible authority in the home hardly rivaled by the men of the family... In sickness she is the first to be consulted, for she is generally something of an herb doctor, and her advice is sought by the young people of half the countryside in all things from a love affair to putting a new web in the loom.

Because of the religious environment of the Appalachian region, in which nearly everyone was staunchly Protestant, most of the people practicing what we today call granny magic would have disagreed that what they were doing was witchcraft. In fact, many charms and spells included invocations of psalms, prayers, and verses from the Bible.

Folk Magic and Healing Remedies

Many of the granny magic traditions of the mountains share some common ground with the folk magic found in other parts of the world. Depending on what part of Appalachia someone lives in, and the traditions that have been handed down from one generation to another, a practitioner of granny magic might follow a variety of practices.

Beth Ward writes in *The Long Tradition of Folk Healing Among Southern Appalachian Women*.

These women knew that catnip tea or red alder tea kept infants from getting hives. They prescribed stewed down calamus root to help soothe colic. They put sulfur in the soles of shoes to help ease flu symptoms. And if someone came to them with a bad burn, they knew that blowing smoke and chanting the right words could talk the fire out.

In addition to magical traditions, many of the granny women of the past served as healers and midwives. The granny woman would arrive at the home of a mother in labor with a bag of herbs, roots, and leaves. She would use these to help the mother safely deliver a child, and then might recite a verse from the Bible or a protective charm to keep both mother and baby healthy, especially in a time of high infant and perinatal mortality.

Because mountain dwellers were often nowhere near a doctor's office, and the cost of professional medical treatment was prohibitive, it often fell to the local women to provide healthcare for their neighbors, setting broken bones, treating fevers, and caring for the terminally ill.

Granny Witchcraft Today

Today, there's been a resurgence in interest in the granny magic tradition, although it never really went away in Appalachia. As more people in the mountains try to hold on to their traditional customs, granny magic is becoming popular once more, although it's unlikely that it will ever go mainstream. After all, the cultural context and awareness of Appalachian life is a key component of the practice. Authors like H. Byron Ballard, the official village witch of Asheville, North Carolina, and Sara Amis, a university instructor and practicing Pagan, work hard to educate people about the traditional mountain customs, and ensure the legacy of their Appalachian ancestors.

Amis told Beth Ward, "Our people don't always call this magic... and they don't always call it witchcraft. It's just what you do. If you grow up in the South, it is everywhere. But people don't always name it, not even among themselves."

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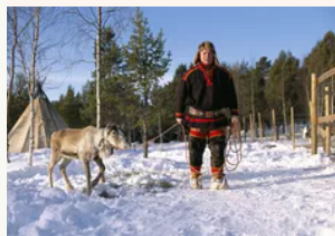
Do you believe in destiny?

- ☐ Yes, definitely
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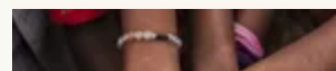
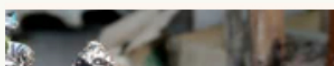
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